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FATHER'S BROTHER'S DAUGHTER MARRIAGE IN KURDISTAN

FREDRIK BARTH

[1] THE PREVALENCE of preferential father's brothers' daughter marriage in the Middle East, and its association with Islam, has frequently received reference. Yet no clear picture of the possible structural implications of this form of preferential marriage has emerged, nor of the actual distribution and frequency of the practice. The present paper attempts to analyze the relationship between the Kurdish form of segmentary lineage organization and this marriage pattern.

[2] Any chain of unilineal descent in a stable or expanding population constitutes a ramifying system where succeeding generations in many lines tend to be larger and more inclusive than the preceding. It is this chain, generally in compressed form, which is utilized to organize a descent group in the form of a segmentary lineage organization. This organizational form was named by Gifford and later by Firth, who called it a "ramage," and first analyzed fully by Evans-Pritchard.[1] Recent work on this type of organization has been lucidly summarized by Forde.[2]

[3] In almost all the lineage systems described in the literature, the lineage, or the clan of which it is a part, is an exogamous group. This fact of exogamy has important implications, e.g. for the development of dispersed clans and consolidation of a "daughter's son" relationship as a mechanism for grafting foreign lineages to the dominant lineage of an area (as described for the Nuer), and it is further frequently reflected in the whole construction of kinship terminology.[3]

Lineage exogamy is, however, an essential feature of lineage systems. No matter what the marriage pattern in a population may be, a strict chain of unilineal descent offers an equally clear framework on which a segmentary lineage organization may be based. In a patrilineal system, matrilateral ties may be regarded as socially irrelevant to the political relations of segments and whole lineages—marriage patterns may, so to speak, be "divorced" from their role in defining the relations between political groups. This lack of association of lineage organization and exogamy is common among Semitic and Iranian tribes of the Middle East,

1 E. W. Gifford, *Miwok Lineages and the Political Unit in Aboriginal California* (American Anthropologist, vol. 28, pp. 389–401, 1926); Raymond Firth, *We, the Tikopia* (London, 1936); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: Tribe and Clan* (Sudan Notes and Records, 1935–1935), and *The Nuer* (London, 1940).

2 Daryll Forde, *The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups* (American Anthropologist, vol. 55, pp. 17–41, 1953).

3 F. Eggan, *Social Organization of the Western Pueblos* (Chicago, 1950).

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and in the same area possibly also among some Caucasian groups.[4] However, though marriage patterns do not function to define the relations between lineages, this does not assume that marriage relations and maternal ties have indeed no relevance of a structural or specifically political nature. The present paper presents an hypothesis regarding these implications in the Kurdish lineage organization, specifically the meaning of a pattern of father's brother's daughter marriage, for the consideration of students working with similar problems in the Middle East.

Features of Kurdish culture and society have been described elsewhere,[5] but might be summarized briefly. The Kurds are a linguistic and ethnic group, nearly exclusively Moslem by religion, totalling some three million people.[6] They occupy a semi-continuous territory along the hills and mountains east and north of the Fertile Crescent, divided between the modern states of Persia, Iraq, Turkey, the U.S.S.R., and Syria. Some few groups of Kurds have remained nomadic till the present day, following their herds of sheep, goats, and large cattle into the mountains in the summer and down on the plains in the winter. The great majority are today subsistence farmers, many of whom practice a pattern of localized transhumance. The present discussion relates to the southern districts of Iraq Kurdistan, where material was collected in the field from February to August, 1951.

Two basic types of organization were found: a tribal system, based on descent, and a feudal system, based on class and land ownership. The latter is progressively becoming assimilated into the modern structure of the state of Iraq; the former, a patrilineal lineage system, survives only among the nomads and a minority of the farmers in the more isolated territories.

Kurdish tribal organization is a segmentary lineage organization of very simple type. The largest kinship unit, the *tira*, is a maximal lineage, divisible into segments according to the charter of patrilineal descent. The genealogical depth of the tira varies. For the sedentary Hamawands (location: Kirkuk Liwa, Iraq), the typical ancestor is nine generations removed from the present adult generation; for the nomadic Warda Shatri (location: roaming in Sulaimani Liwa, Iraq), twelve generations.

Several tira may be united, though not necessarily, in a political confederacy of variable endurance, the most important in southern Kurdistan being at present

4 Lewis J. Lindwall, *Marriage and the Family in Caucasia* (Vienna, 1931).

5 V. F. Minorsky, "Kurds and Kurdistan" (in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, London, 1913); E. R. Leach, *Social and Economic Organization of the Rowanduz Kurds* (Monographs in Social Anthropology, no. 3, London, 1940); Frederik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan* (Universitetets Etnografiske Museum, Bulletin no. 7, Oslo, 1953).

6 *The Middle East* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1950).

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the Jaf confederacy of nomadic as well as sedentary tirsa. The following discussion will, for the sake of simplicity, relate only to the Hamawands, an independent tira of population ca. 1000-1500, which became sedentary some two or three generations ago.

The lineage organization has two main areas of relevance: land ownership, and defence and offence in war. Property rights to land and grazing area are held jointly by the tira as a whole; exclusive usufruct rights are vested in its localized segments, inhabiting compact villages with a population of 50 to 200 individuals. Within the village territory, men have traditional rights to certain fields. These rights are passed on from father to son, but are not inalienable, and land is freely redistributed by the village council when the need arises. If a segment becomes extinct, its territory passes as normal inheritance to the other segments of the lineage, according to the degree of kinship (so any one level of segmentation, "brothers" exclude "cousins" from inheritance).

Further, until successful pacification in 1932, the lineage was, and still is potentially, also a military unit, mobilized in case if a segment were attacked, from without, and divided in opposition according to the segmentary charter when conflicts arose within the group. Conflicts relating to territorial rights were rife, both within, where they led to fission, and without, where they led to conquest or loss of territory.

There is a close contrast between the Kurdish and most African systems in the readiness with which the problems of fusion and fission are solved. A man's rights to land are limited to the territory of the village segment of his lineage; a stranger or a person from another lineage segment is accepted into a village only as hired farm help ("naqar") of degraded status. The territorial exclusiveness of lineage segments thus tends to be maintained to high degree, and there are no kinship mechanisms for developing "attached" lineages with local territorial and political rights.[7] The segmentary nature of the maximal lineage expresses itself directly in geographical distribution, and the respective territories of major and minor segments, inhabited nearly exclusively by them, down to the village level, can be plotted on a map or clearly seen where one has a view of the valley bottoms. The main integrative factors relevant to segments larger than the village seem to be territorial contiguity, knowledge of common descent, and the importance of the tira as a defensive unit—this last probably being of most weight. No religious or ritual

[7] A permanent relationship may occasionally be established between a conquering lineage group and a conquered, non-tribal peasant population, who retain certain rights as serfs of the ruling lineage. In these cases, a caste barrier is set up, preventing intermarriage between the two groups. This relationship, observed on the northern margins of Hamawand territory, does not seem to be very stable.

No religious or ritual 571

mechanisms exist for bringing together any group larger than the village, and no symbiotic relations of a practical or ritual nature have been developed.

This organizational form is associated with a strong emphasis on the father's brother's daughter as preferred spouse, and marked tendency to close family endogamy. The strength of emphasis is indicated by (1) expressed norms, (2) relative brideprice, and (3) actual statistical occurrence. 582

(1) Informants agree that paternal cousins have first rights to a girl, and 583 where the father of a girl contemplates giving her in marriage to anyone else, the 604 paternal cousin must first release her by renouncing his claim. Cases of violence 605 resulting from breach of this obligation on the part of the father were collected in the field and have been recorded by others in the literature.[6] Giving one's daughter to a brother's son is further considered thoughtful and proper: the father knows his daughter's spouse well, and will also be able to exert some control over his actions toward her after marriage; marriage should be between equals, and no one is closer in status and sentiments than a paternal cousin. Small children are pleasantly embarrassed when teased for being "in love" with their paternal cousin. The importance of endogamy in maintaining family property is also 582 recognized, though the problem only arises with any degree of gravity where Ku-ā-zā rustic laws of inheritance, giving stipulated fractions of the estate to female descendants, are strictly followed, and this does not generally seem to be the case.

(2) It is an agreed privilege for paternal cousins, to less extent also other near 605 kin, to receive the girl at a reduced brideprice. The normal brideprice for village 583 girls ranges between £50-150. Paternal cousins generally pay only wedding expenses.

(3) The actual frequency of father's brother's daughter, and other cousin, 162 marriage is high, apparently ranging around fifty percent. The degree of relationship between all living spouses in two normal sized Hamawand villages fell into the following categories:

Fa and Mo						
FaBrDa (amoun)	MoBrDa (khalun)	SiDa (pure)	Other relative	Unrelated, in village	Other village	Total
9	1	2	3	2	4	21

Taking the normal fluctuations in size and sex distribution of sibling groups into account, this probably approximates the maximal frequency that marriage with actual, non-classificatory paternal cousin can reasonably attain.

6 E.g. W. R. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan* (London, 1921), p. 71.

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When the cost of marrying an unrelated, "stranger" girl is so high and the normative preference for near kin clear, the inducement for the young man to seek a bride among his cousins is evident. Consequently, the young men make the "right" choice though they appear subjectively to feel, and inevitably express the opinion, that they are entirely free to seek any bride they might wish. The problem in the situation centers around what the motivation of the girl's father is, that he would forego his right to a brideprice which, to the Kurdish farmer, constitutes a minor fortune. Or put somewhat differently, the central problem is: what are the advantages gained in this system by giving one's daughter to a brother's son which compensate one for the loss of the brideprice.

The answer would seem to lie in the political structure. In the Kurdish lineage system, all groups are subject to a constant pressure towards segmentation and fission, consolidated by the interlocking circles of identification normally associated with segmentary descent systems (among the Nuer, territorial vs. descent groups; cross-cutting age-grades; among Tallensi, further the ritual collaboration between lineages, etc.). This pressure is painfully evident in factional activity within the villages, and emerges in all first-hand descriptions of Kurdish life.[9] Kurdish villages are characterized by a constant struggle for political power on the part of a majority of the adult men, at times even women. Such political power is proportional to the number of riflemen one can mobilize to support one's claims. In a patrilineal lineage system, a man can expect political support only from his agnatic relatives: those who by descent belong to his political sub-section; and the factions in the village tend to be alignments of the younger men of a small lineage segment around an older leader. These segments consist primarily of brothers, sons, and brothers' sons. The relation to the latter is most critical: it crosses the first potential line of cleavage between collateral branches. If a man alienates his nephews by refusing them their traditional rights, he loses their political support. If he, on the other hand, gives them his daughters in marriage, the ties are reinforced and lineage solidarity maintained. The girl's father creates an obligation on the part of his brother's son to give him political support by exempting him from paying the brideprice. No other son-in-law can, in the lineage system, fill this role as political supporter; consequently they must inevitably pay brideprice. The transaction may thus be regarded as constituting a type of delayed exchange: the father receives political allegiance in his lifetime from his brother's son in return for the daughter which he gives him. In this way, the pattern of preferential father's brother's

[9] E.g. C. J. Rich, *Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan* (London, 1836); E. B. Soane, *Through Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise* (London, 1926); Hay, op. cit.

daughter marriage serves to reinforce the political implications of the lineage system.

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daughter marriage serves to reinforce the political implications of the lineage system.

If this view is generally correct, one would expect to find a high frequency of father's brother's daughter marriage associated with a developed lineage organization in the Middle East, and the frequencies to be appreciably lower in villages with a different type of organization. In the southern Kurdish area, this is clearly so: for other areas, the literature gives no conclusive evidence.

In the southern Kurdish feudally organized territory, neighboring on the above discussed Hamawand territory, the comparative picture might be summarized as follows: (1) The expressed norms are modified, though not basically changed. First rights of paternal cousins are not as strongly emphasized, and the ideal of equality between spouses tends to be interpreted in terms of village endogamy rather than with reference to descent group. (2) Brideprices tend to be lower for all categories of husbands, especially those of the local community (this holds true for the villagers, not for the larger towns, where great variations in class and wealth intervene); some villages have made formal agreements that no brideprice should be changed within the village unit. An alternative and moderately popular way of avoiding brideprice is the sister exchange between two indifferently related men. (3) The actual frequency of father's brother's daughter marriage closely drops, while village endogamy (in villages generally larger than those with a lineage organization) remains high. A complete census of marriages in one such nontribal village may serve as an example:

FaBrDa (amount)	MoBrDa (khalmat)	Fa and Mo SDa (parra)	Other relative	Unrelated, in village	Other village	Total
6	1	1	9	19	10	46

This picture would seem to be consistent with the views expressed above.

Hilma Granqvist[10] gives some comparable material from an Arab village in Palestine, where the local community is divided into patrilineal descent groups, called clans, apparently of a segmentary type; but where several of these descent groups reside together in a large village, and have no wider political or territorial importance. She offers the following frequencies of degree of relationship between spouses in one village:[11]

10 Hilma Granqvist, *Marriage Conditions in a Palestinian Village* (Helsingfors, 1931).
11 *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 92, 194-195.

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FaBrDa	Total marriages within clans	Between unrelated co-villagers	With strangers	Total
35 13.3%	89 33.7%	62 23%	113 42.8%	264

There is some suggestion that clan endogamy has similar factional implications in this situation as lineage segment endogamy has in the Kurdish system, but that the emphasis centers on the opposition between co-resident clans—witness the discrepancy between 33 percent marriages within own clan vs. 23 percent with unrelated co-villagers, in a village where four major and six smaller clans co-reside. Yet Granqvist perfers the standard explanation: " . . . marriage with the father's brother's son is preferred to any other marriage in order to prevent a stranger taking possession of the property and inheritance of the family."[12] This even though her argument is further weakened by the fact that her villagers do not observe the proper Koranic rule[13] of giving both male and female relatives of the same degree a share of inheritance, in the proportion 2:1— " . . . even if it be seldom that a man die without leaving any sons, yet the possibility affects it so far as to allow marriage between the children of brothers to appear specially desirable."[14]

Chapple and Coon offer a theoretical analysis of parallel cousin marriage, with special reference to the Bedouin[15] which, if I have understood their argument correctly, emphasizes the incompatibility of a subordinate son-in-law relation to a non-relative with a system of strong political and economic identification with the lineage segment—in this case seen as composed of father, son, and father's brother. This incompatibility is then resolved by a pattern of establishing the son-in-law relationship with the father's brother, through marriage with a father's brother's daughter. This appears as a rather round-about way of attacking the problem from the point of view developed here; but their discussion indicates that the present viewpoints are not inapplicable to this marriage pattern among the Bedouin.

The points of view expressed above might be summarized briefly. As contrasted to most African systems, marriage patterns among the Moslem peoples of the Middle East are liberated from their role in expressing the relations between segments of a larger lineage system. The potential relevance of these patterns to social structure may then theoretically be utilized in various ways.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 78, where further references to this view are given.
13 A. S. Tritton, *Islam, Belief and Practices* (London, 1951), p. 66.
14 Granqvist, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
15 E. D. Chapple and C. S. Coon, *Principles of Anthropology* (New York, 1942), pp. 305-306.

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In many areas of the Middle East, a pattern of close family endogamy and preferential father's brother's daughter marriage has been assumed to be associated with a desire to maintain family property in the face of Koranic rules of inheritance. The apparently exceptionally high frequency of father's brother's daughter marriage among the Kurdish tribes with lineage organization, and possibly among other groups with a similar organization, requires separate explanation. The thesis of this short discussion has been that such a pattern of father's brother's daughter marriage plays a prominent role in solidifying the minimal lineage as a corporate group in factional struggle. Marriages of this type thus serve to reinforce the political implications of the lineage system, not, as in most African systems, relative to the relations between whole lineages, but here, on the contrary, relative to the first potential lines of fission and segmentation within the minimal lineage itself.

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